

State of Obesity 2019: Evidence-Based Policies to Combat Obesity and Promote a Healthier America

Nine U.S. states had adult obesity rates above 35 percent in 2018, up from seven states at that level in 2017, an historic level of obesity in the U.S., according to the 16th annual *State of Obesity: Better Policies for a Healthier America* report released September 2019 by the Trust for America's Health. The report, which includes a special section on racial and ethnic disparities in obesity and policy recommendations to combat the continuing crisis, is available online at www.tfah.org/stateofobesity2019.

Obesity rates are alarmingly high across the United States: In 2018, Colorado had the lowest rate of obesity in the nation with an adult obesity rate of 23 percent, which two decades ago was approximately the highest state level of obesity. In 2000, West Virginia had the highest rate of obesity in the country with an adult obesity rate of 23.9 percent. In addition to the rapid and steady increases in obesity, racial, ethnic, and geographic disparities also persist. The report emphasizes the urgent need to increase evidence-based obesity prevention programs to prevent disease and potentially save billions in healthcare spending.

Other Key Findings:

- **Adult obesity rates are at or above 35 percent in nine states:** Alabama (36.2 percent), Arkansas (37.1), Iowa (35.3), Kentucky (36.6), Louisiana (36.8), Mississippi (39.5), Missouri (35), North Dakota (35.1), and West Virginia (39.5). As recently as 2012, no state had an adult obesity rate over 35 percent.
- **Obesity levels are highest in Black and Latino communities:** these communities are more likely to be in neighborhoods with few options for healthy foods and physical activity, and, are the target of widespread marketing of unhealthy foods. As of 2015-2016, the latest available data, nearly half of Latino (47 percent) and Black adults (46.8) had obesity while adult obesity rates among White and Asian adults were 37.9 percent and 12.7 percent respectively. Incidence of childhood obesity was highest amongst Latino children at 25.8 percent while 22 percent of Black children had obesity, 14 percent of White children had obesity and 11 percent of Asian children had obesity.

Addressing the obesity epidemic is imperative for the health of the nation. Obesity drives an [estimated \\$149 billion](#) annually in directly related healthcare spending, and an additional [\\$66 billion](#) annually in lowered economic productivity. Obesity also directly impacts our national security. According to Mission: Readiness, excess weight prevents nearly [one in three young adults](#) from qualifying for military service and the Department of Defense is spending more than [\\$1 billion each year](#) on obesity-related issues.

Despite the country-wide increase in obesity rates, there are instances where policies and programs have made it easier for people in particular communities or population groups to gain access to healthy foods and physical activity opportunities, which has led to some improvements in obesity rates. For example, the [obesity rate declined](#) among children in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Program between 2011 and 2014. However, this progress is fragile and at risk of being halted or even reversed if we do not renew our commitment to prevention policies.

***State of Obesity 2019* includes 31 recommendations for policymakers, including that Congress:**

- Strengthen federal best practices to build state and local capacity and reduce disparities by expanding evidence-based programs that address obesity like, CDC's State Physical Activity and Nutrition (SPAN) grants and community health programs like CDC's Racial and Ethnic Approaches for Community Health program (REACH).
- Make physical activity and the built environment safer and more accessible by codifying the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans; fully funding current physical education and other schooltime and out-of-school physical activity opportunities; and ensuring that infrastructure legislation considers and funds efforts that encourage physical activity, like Complete Streets.
- Prioritize healthy eating by strengthening essential nutrition supports for low-income children, families, and individuals through anti-hunger programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and nutrition assistance programs, like the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and ensuring that all Child Nutrition Reauthorization efforts are aligned the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.
- Change how unhealthy food and beverages are priced and marketed, especially for communities that bear a disproportionate obesity burden, by closing tax loopholes and eliminating unhealthy food and beverages advertising business costs deductions.
- Build capacity for CDC and public health departments to work with other sectors (such as housing, transportation, etc.) to address social determinants of health, the nonmedical factors that affect communities' health status including the obesity levels.

Select Recommendations for Key U.S. Federal Agencies:

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services:

- CDC should create a best-practices guide to support state-level obesity work and estimate the resources necessary for successful state programs.
- HHS should update the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans at least every 10 years with the most current scientific and medical knowledge.
- Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services should educate health care practitioners on how to refer to obesity-related community services.

U.S. Department of Agriculture:

- Identify opportunities to improve diet quality in SNAP, without affecting access or decreasing benefit levels, such as piloting voluntary programs that test healthier eating strategies.
- Ensure that updated Dietary Guidelines are evidence-based and include guidelines for pregnant women, and infants and toddlers through 24 months, as required by law.
- Implement evidence-based nutrition standards in all nutrition programming and stop rollbacks of current standards.

U.S. Department of Transportation:

- Include physical activity opportunities in all federal infrastructure initiatives and set aside Surface Transportation Block Grant funding for transportation alternatives that encourage walking, biking, or rolling.
- Make physical activity safer by adding Safe Routes to School, Vision Zero, and Complete Streets as eligible Highway Safety Improvement Program uses.

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